

The Seedbed Blog by Chase Franklin

International Ministries - In the Company of the Fathers: An Introduction



In the first class I took in seminary, the professor made an almost casual suggestion that remains perhaps the single most important piece of advice I received in my theological education. For every semester of seminary, he said, we should read the works of one **Church Father** to become grounded in the great tradition. At the time, I was a 23-year-old kid with a calling to ministry, but little else. I assumed the only text I needed in seminary was the Bible and, to that point, my theological reading had consisted of the writings of a couple of guys named Joshua. I had no idea who these Fathers were.

Now a professor of theology myself, I have come to see that my experience as a young seminarian is anything but unique. Most Protestants I meet, whether in the classroom or in the local church, are unacquainted with the **writings** of the Church Fathers. Piously, we might say this ignorance stems from a sola scriptura methodological principle that remains a part of the Protestant DNA. However, the Protestants I know who are intentional about discipleship read voraciously from the best seller list of their local Christian bookstore and rarely interpret Scripture without reference to their Bible's footnotes. It seems we read plenty of things to help us understand the meaning of Scripture. Unfortunately, however, most Protestants do not look behind the twenty-first century, much less the sixteenth, for their interpretive guides. Thankfully, I had a professor who led me elsewhere, and, taking his advice, I began to explore this foreign and exotic world. Ironically, the name to which I first turned, Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130 C.E. – 200 C.E.i), is best known precisely for his insight that Scripture demands an interpretive guide.

A late second century bishop of modern day Lyons in France, Irenaeus was faced with the considerable challenge posed to the infant Church by the various theological traditions known to history as "Gnostics." These groups claimed to possess a secret, salvific knowledge taught to a select few by Jesus Christ which entailed the distinction between the good God whom Jesus revealed and the evil creator known to Israel, the dismissal of material creation as evil, and the rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative revelation. While this secret knowledge was contained in the Scriptures, the Gnostics claimed that a special, allegorical lens was needed to unlock it.

As a bishop, familiar with the teachings and traditions of churches in several different geographical locations, Irenaeus was able to discern the vacuity of the Gnostics' theological claims. Surprisingly, however, he agreed with their methodological assumption that the Scriptures required a lens—the ancient word is *regula* (rule)—through which to be understood. Without such a *regula*, or, in the case of the Gnostics, with the wrong *regula*, Scripture would inevitably be misunderstood and misappropriated. Put another way, we need to read things to understand Scripture, but we **need to read** the right things.

Unfortunately, such a hermeneutical principle risks obscuring Scripture by making the interpretive *regula*, as opposed to Scripture, the true authority. Nevertheless, in Irenaeus' work, the opposite occurs. Indeed, to read Irenaeus is to read nothing more than a masterful retelling of Scripture. In his able hands, we see the blossoming of Scripture as a coherent narrative revealing the one God who works in all things, both in creation and redemption, both in Israel and the Church, both in the Old and New Covenants, both in the Son and the Spirit. We thus find God's original creation not destroyed, but restored in the work of Jesus Christ who reveals not a previously unknown God, but the physical face of a previously unseen God. As Irenaeus puts it, "Thus [Christ] showed that the God who made the earth and commanded it to bear fruit, and who established the waters and produced the springs, this same [God] bestows upon the human race the blessing of food and the favor of drink through His Son in these last times—the incomprehensible through the comprehensible, and the invisible through the visible, since He does not exist outside of the Father, but in His bosom" (Adv. Haer. 3.11.5).

Thus, Irenaeus shows us that the Church's *regula*, unlike the Gnostics' secretive, allegorical key, is not foreign to Scripture but arises from it, in concert with it, revealing its inner logic and beauty. Indeed, the nature of the Church's *regula* is precisely to point beyond itself, to place the focus on Scripture.

Twenty-first century Christians are in no less need of a *regula* than were second century Christians. But like those persuaded by the Gnostics, we often reach for the wrong things. In reality, the best *regula* we have are the **writings** that many have never heard of, the writings of the Church Fathers. To read their writings is to witness Scripture shining forth its brilliance. To know their lives is to see Scripture performed in the manner intended, a manner that produces holiness.

Of course, for the Fathers to serve as our *regula*, we need first to spend time in their company. Therefore, in a series of forthcoming **blogposts at Seedbed**, I will introduce readers to these early figures. My hope is that these posts will merely serve as a primer, leading to a greater engagement and reading of their works, where the true wisdom can be gained. What I suspect is that in being led to the Fathers, we will always be led to Scripture.